

Adler meets his constituents after 100 days

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When Rep. John Adler, D-N.J., stopped at a diner on Route 72 this week to discuss his first 100 days in Congress, he was comfortable blending in with the lunch crowd, who did not seem to recognize their new man in Washington.

"You know what I would like? Could I get a chocolate milkshake, please?" the freshman congressman asked the waitress.

With the 111th Congress in recess, Adler, 49, is crisscrossing the 3rd District, offering face time with constituents, talking early accomplishments and listening to stories about economic misfortune.

Being a congressman is far more demanding than he imagined, Adler admitted. But he loves the work, and the awe factor has yet to wear off.

"Every day when I look at the dome, I look at the Capitol and know what it represents for our country and for the rest of the world," Adler said. "I feel such a surge of pride and patriotism about what our country has been for over 200 years now - I have to keep our future better."

Among his assignments, Adler has a seat on the House Financial Services Committee, chaired by the outspoken Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass.

His proudest achievement so far was to persuade Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke to include commercial fleet vehicle management in one of several initiatives to keep credit markets flowing. PHH Corp. in Mount Laurel, which provides fleet management services, had sought

Adler's help. The move saved hundreds of jobs.

On this side of his district, Adler got the Army Corps of Engineers to close the munitions storage site in Surf City and move World War I-era explosives recovered during beach replenishment operations on the same day they are found.

He also secured \$12 million for the design of a new bridge to Long Beach Island after hosting a round-table discussion between state and local officials in February.

"It was very nice of him," said state Assemblyman Daniel M. Van Pelt, R-Ocean, after the meeting. "You know, it's obviously very politically savvy to try to make inroads into Ocean County. It's smart on his part."

Historically, the district is reliably Republican. Before Adler, Jim Saxton held the seat for 24 years. To prove his election was not a fluke in a bad year for the GOP, Adler must get himself re-elected in 19 months.

The National Republican Congressional Committee is not waiting. Relentless in so-called "robo-calls" and press releases, the GOP criticizes Adler on such issues as support of the \$800 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the economic stimulus package. The bill passed the House without a single GOP vote.

"Here's Adler's problem for me," said Chris Russell, who served as campaign manager for Republican opponent Chris Myers last year. "I think (Adler's) completely out of step in terms of issues with Ocean County residents. It's basically tax-cutting, small government-type values in Ocean County."

Barely two months into office and Adler voted for the biggest increase in federal spending in the U.S. history, Russell pointed out.

"He knows he can't win Ocean County on the issues so he is going to try and charm them to death," Russell said.

Without government intervention to stimulate the economy, Adler warned the national unemployment rate could have hit 15 percent. Democratic and Republican economists agreed; Democratic and Republican lawmakers did not, Adler said.

"I think there are a lot of encouraging signs. I think the housing market has hit bottom. I think banks have by and large avoided the insolvency crisis that they were facing in September and October and are starting to lend again," Adler said.